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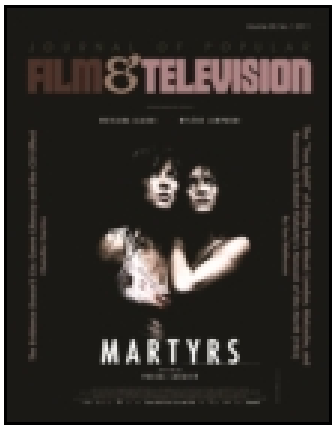

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Who's Laughing now? The Postmodern Splatter Film

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Who's Laughing Now? . . .

By MICHAEL A. ARNZEN

> Nor is it an accident that the horror story ends so often with an O. Henry twist that leads straight down a mine shaft. When we turn to the creepy movie or the crawly book, we are not wearing our "Everything works out for the best" hats. We're waiting to be told what we so often suspect—that everything is turning to shit. (King 32)

In a hilarious scene from Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead 2* (1987), the hero of the horror film (Ash, played by Bruce Campbell) literally engages in hand-to-hand combat with himself. In an acting job so terrible that it's good, Campbell's character wrestles with his own hand —which has been possessed by a bite from a zombie—until it bests him, flaying him unconscious by beating his skull against a wall and cracking porcelain dishes over his head. As the protagonist slumps to the floor, the camera focuses on the possessed hand, which suddenly attains a comic chirruping mouthless voice (reminiscent of *Gremlins*) as it props itself up on its fingers (in homage to "The Thing" from *The Addams Family*) to scrabble away from the man in escape.

Realizing that it is still attached by the wrist, the hand conveniently sights a discarded meat cleaver across the room. Eagerly, using its fingertips as a clawhammer, the hand hauls its unconscious victim toward the blade to finish the job it began. Moments before reaching the cleaver, however, a long butcher's knife plunges into the nemesis appendage. Impaled, the hand screams and flops, until the camera twists up to reveal the hero's manic grin: With his teeth, Ash yanks backward on the pullcord of a chainsaw and revs the machine to life, insanely screaming "Who's laughing now?" over and over while dismembering himself, his face splattered and drenched with an impossible shower of blood.

Naturally, the hand is still animate after this horrific scene. The hero traps the disembodied hand in a coffee can (like one might capture a

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spider) and piles a stack of books atop the can so it won't move. The hero states, "Here's your new home," and steps away. The title of the top book on the stack reads *A Farewell to Arms.*

There's more going on in this scene than the typical "slice-and-dice" gore and droll horror associated with exploitative films of this ilk. There is a disturbing feel about it—an uneasiness that is not caused by a fear of demonic possession (only part of the hero is possessed, which is hardly realistic), nor terror from the gore of dismemberment (the camera focuses only on the man's face, laughing as his own blood drenches him), nor the insanity of the soundtrack and dialogue (a cacophony of gangling chainsaw engines and screaming combined with the hand's *Gremlin*-like chattering), but there exists in all this horror an unsettling and sublime hilarity about the scene that refuses to be ignored. It is nearly impossible *not* to chuckle at the outrageousness of the hero's self-mutilation. And when the character cries "Who's laughing now?" the moment is too hyperreal to be cast aside as frivolous coincidence. This scene from *Evil Dead 2* is the postmodern turn "in the flesh."

"Splatter films" are nothing new; they've proliferated since their primary source's theatrical release in 1968: George Romero's neo-classic *Night of the Living Dead* (Waller 4). Romero's film is the "primordial" splatter film because it was the first to use gore and graphic violence to reveal "an amoral world where evil cannot be easily contained" (Nutman 28). Films such as *Halloween, Prom Night, Slumber Party Massacre, Texas Chainsaw Massacre,* ad nauseam, are resplendent on video rental shelves today, and most have spawned sequels to the twelfth degree (including, ironically, Romero's film). Twenty-five years post-*Night of the Living Dead*, splatter films have become icons of mass culture and have affected the film industry tremendously. Many films today use graphic violence to achieve effect, and it has been argued that Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* is solely responsible. Nearly all action/adventure, suspense/mystery, and science fiction/horror films have a high threshold for graphic violence. De-

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spite this violent trend in all film, I would like to contain the term "splatter film" by defining it as a filmic text that promotes itself in the marketplace as one of "horror," and self-consciously revels in the special effects of gore as an artform.[1] Treating *Evil Dead 2* as a core sample of contemporary splatter films, it is my purpose here to argue that these films not only intrinsically conform to notions of "postmodernism," but also that these films portray the postmodern condition as an optimistic vehicle for cultural transformation.[2]

It is generally understood by critics that most horror films are essentially conservative in nature: They tend to re-establish the order (social, moral, or otherwise) that they symbolically deconstruct (Bridgstock 120). As in conventional westerns, horror films typically have identifiable heroes, and good usually overcomes (the overt) evil. As Derrida might say: In traditional horror films, a subject survives, an author (or director) didactically reverts to theme, and a displaced center is reconstructed.

Splatter films, however, make no such pretensions. In fact, most revel in their lack of order and plot: They are fragmentary visions, manic montages full of "subject camera movement . . . cross-cuttings from hunted to hunter, and ominous juxtapositions and contrasts" (Fraser 46). Fragmented narrative (and direction), then, is intrinsic not only to an intellectual response to a splatter text but also to an emotional response—the fragmentation itself displaces the viewer in relation to the film and causes a sense of Freud's Uncanny, or "that which makes you feel uneasy in the world of your normal experience" (Prawer 111).[3] Ironically, Freud based his theory on E. T. A. Hoffman's "The Sandman," a horror story about a bogeyman who throws sand into the eyes, which causes them to pop out (McElroy 3).[4] The fragmentation of a splatter film attempts not only to blur vision this way but also to show it on-screen: Vision is consistently fragmented.

The horror of contemporary films in the genre is not communicated by a violent displacement of a center but by its complete absence. The anatomizing that occurs during the course of a splatter film parallels the fragmented visage of these texts à la Barthes: Just as a character is chopped up, so, too, is the text. When the protagonist of *Evil Dead 2* dismembers his hand, the camera is hyperactive and the scene is destabilizing, offering the viewer only fast glimpses of things in motion; indeed, while Ash's hand is beating him, one senses that the film has been "sped up."[5]

Screaming or laughing? Horror films convey a subtle form of humor.

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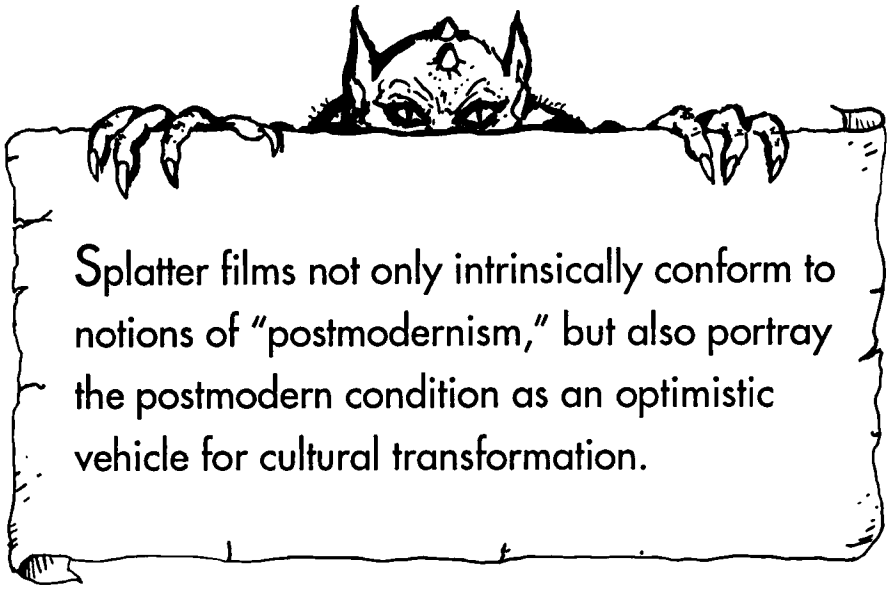
This metaphoric moment in *Evil Dead 2* is representative of the text itself, and this notion is forwarded by the humorous reference to *A Farewell to Arms*. The filmic text is impossible to contain, even by referring to other texts outside the film. All is disjointed for the sake of shock in a splatter film, and the spectacle of violence replaces any pretensions to narrative structure, because gore is the only part of the film that is reliably consistent. As a French reviewer of the film *Blood Feast* once reported: "The moral anguish of the film comes from the fact that the normal limits of visual horror are surpassed, so that one has to be ready for anything. It is impossible to tell at what point a sequence is going to end" (Fraser 41). Hence, the critical claim that these films are "gore for gore's sake" is inaccurate and banal: Splatter films are gore for *stability's* sake. The only surety in the fragmented narrative comes from "being ready for anything," both visually and narratively. And the only viewer expectation that is guaranteed fulfillment is the anticipation of gory depictions of violence.

But if such gore is stable, such stability resides in a consistency of genre expectations, not of text. And it is important to realize that scenes of graphic violence in contemporary splatter films are "simulations"[6] of dismemberment—these are not snuff films but, as Gregory A. Waller puts it in his survey of contemporary horror films, *American Horrors,* "representations of violence . . . embedded in a generic, narrative, fictional, often highly stylized, and oddly playful context" (6). Indeed, the theatricality[7] of gore renders even the genre unstable when texts are closely examined, because each anonymous special effects crew competitively revises another's vision of violence, and no two films use consistent simulations, not even sequels by the same director. The text of a film like *Evil Dead 2* could be read as a loose stringing together of excess gorish effects that attempt to "out-gross"[8] the original film, but even contained within the sequel itself the color of blood ranges from red to green to black, independent of its source. The simulation never stagnates. Vera Dika, in *Games of Terror,* her formal critique of slasher films, argues that this difference in technique is dependent on production budget, not artistic difference (62). Indeed, *Evil Dead 2* had a larger budget than the original. However, that horror films on an extremely low budget would desire to divert a majority of their funds to gory effects, opting for ploys of image over narrative, should indicate that there is a postmodern artistic presence at work within these films. Regardless, splatter films can be said to project a certain identity to their audiences—one of Baudrillard's "simulacra"[9]—which is overtly recognized by their audiences. Contemporary culture has become anaesthetized to the shock value of gore since 1968, and today, as Baudrillard himself states, "The real itself appears as a large useless body" (129). In splatter films, that body of reality is made of rubber, and neither the artist nor the audience is hesitant to dissect it for the sake of spectacle. Both viewer and filmic text are "the obscene prey of the world's obscenity" (133).



If we charge the "production" of splatter films for the empty reality that gore signifies, then these texts become postmodern cultural phenomena. According to Browne,

> In film, [postmodernist cultural production] problematizes the question of reference to "the real" altogether by making it explicitly coterminous with another set of texts that it recycles. In this, it extends the process of simulation. (345)

Indeed, splatter films have already spiralled toward simulacra in the manner of production that Browne describes, and their effect is no longer one of horror but one of Derridian "play"[10] and Jamesonian "pastiche."[11]

What potentially began as a series of homages to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (or recapitulations of the film's grotesquerie for profit) has now become a setting for intertextual play. Browne continues: "At present, the form movies are taking is postgeneric; that is, old film genres are treated as pre-texts for new cultural production" (345). This is no less true of a splatter movie (such as *Evil Dead 2*) than a contemporary western (like *Silverado*). Noel Carroll, in *The Philosophy of Horror*, argues that this aspect of the postmodern turn is manifest in today's horror films and literature, and that "contemporary horror often refers to the history of the genre quite explicitly" (211). Carroll cites *Fright Night* as an example, which casts a TV horror show host as a character.

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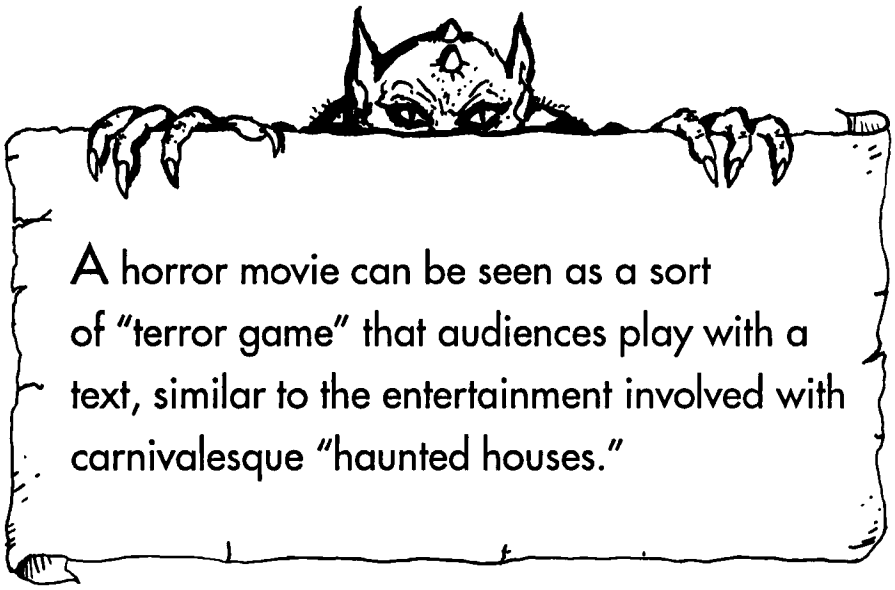
In terms of splatter films, however, there are consistent references to earlier texts, so much so that they pastiche previous works. The scene in *Evil Dead 2* where the protagonist dismembers his own right hand "recycles" (to use Browne's term) sections of such pre-textual films as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (the chainsaw as the preferred tool of dismemberment); *Psycho* (the butcher's knife, the schizophrenia of voices attributed to the same body); *The Hand* (a dismembered and possessed hand that seeks to kill its owner); and *Dracula* (the hand is possessed because it has been bitten by one of the undead), not to mention its prequel. Indeed, all of these references to other texts—which have become recognizable staples of the genre—are a form of pastiche because they are all condensed into one hilarious and ludicrous scene. This self-conscious and anti-illusionistic approach to what could truly be a horrific and frightening scene is postmodern be cause it destroys the effect—via effects—of terror and calls attention simply to itself as a work of art.[12] The same comic-reflexive element can be traced in different threads across the genre (Freddy Kreuger's now incessant delivery of one-liners before slaying victims in the *Night mare on Elm Street* series is the strongest example). Splatter movies, by calling attention to themselves as art forms, call all works of art—specifically filmic texts—into question. Waller suggests that:

> When we place horror within the broader continuum of popular culture, which is in a perpetual state of realignment and renovation, ideologically as well as formally, the boundaries demarcating this genre become hazy at best . . . popular genres mingle, influence each other, and evolve through a cumulative process of repetition and variation. (10)

Evil Dead 2, like most splatter films, pastiches not just the horror genre but also the film genre *in toto*: Early in the film, there is a "car chase" with a disembodied spirit; another scene shows the protagonist equipping himself with various weapons to battle the zombies outside his shack, reminiscent of medieval texts or soldier-of-war films such as *Commando*; the various zombies throughout the film at times appear to be claymation figures like the mythic foes in *The Adventures of Sinbad*, while at others seem to be appropriated from Jim Henson's *Muppet Show*; there is a "time travel" scene, a "love" scene, a "Gothic" scene, a "brawl" scene . . . even the implied "mystery framework" of the absent plot could be said to pastiche *Scooby Doo* (indeed, the characters of the film are cartoonish and forced—one lengthy scene mechanically follows the quick shift of their eyes while cartoon-like sound effects zing and zoom around the room; moments later an animated "ghost" appears to deliver a message important to the plot). The crux of all this is that such randomly chosen and haphazardly placed intertextual references within the text of *Evil Dead 2* render it a discourse that is at once Derrida's "*bricolage*"[13] and Jameson's "pastiche" (and, as my argument suggests, this is true of the entire "genre" of the splatter film).

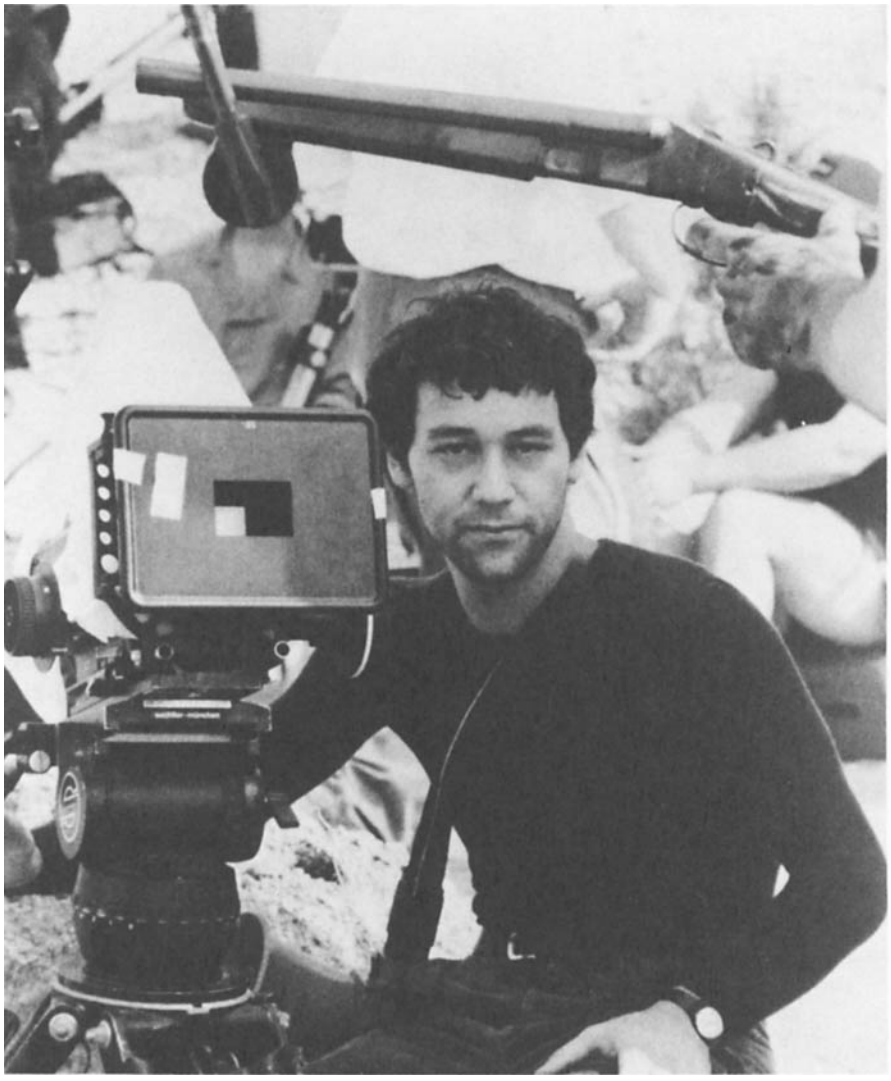
Directoral—or authorial—play is at work throughout splatter films, but it is usually only the special effects creators who have "cult followings" or "fans" (as popular magazines like *Fangoria* and *Gorezone* can attest). In splatter film sequels, story is substituted with what could be termed "formula" (but shouldn't) and the icons associated with the film (Jason's mask, Freddy's glove, the repetitive titles) replace the creative text as event. Authorial presence is subsumed by the presence of texts without identity; dislocated in their unity of fragments, simultaneously dependent and independent of their genre, splatter films pastiche both themselves and the culture that produces and consumes them. As Fredric Jameson might contend, reification has continued infinitely, overtaken by the expansion of the power of capital into the realm of what art signifies (Connor 47).



Arguably, because splatter movies are simulacratic texts, they manifest notorious forms of postmodern "play" in terms of audience response, as well. A horror movie can be seen as a sort of "terror game" that audiences play with a text, similar to the entertainment involved with carnivalesque "haunted houses." This is particularly the case in splatter films, where viewer empathy for virtually unknown actors is teased:

> Once the possibility of splatter effects ha[s] been opened up, an interesting tension [is] established wherein one partly *want[s]* horrible things to happen, for their shock effect, and yet at the same time does not want them to happen to everyone. So . . . one stay[s]

Horror films pastiche other genres: *Army of Darkness.*



Sam Raimi directs on the set of *Evil Dead 2.*

> alert for possible clues as to who in some sense 'deserve[s]' to become victims. (Fraser 47)

Dika refines the essence of such "tension," and writes:

> The predictability of the films' elements encourage a play on seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing, that raises the level of view[er] interaction with the films. The resulting voiced participation tends to unify the audience, making the usual solitary or introspective experience of film viewing an active group experience. (128)[14]

These descriptions of how the text of a splatter film "plays" with its audience seem to frighteningly parallel Baudrillard's concept of postmodern consciousness, or the "schizo who is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion" (133). The game at "play" in a splatter film is one that teases the spectator's ability to predict outcomes, much like a mystery thriller. Indeed, splatter films such as *Prom Night* and Terror Train parody whodunits (Waller 10). Naturally, many splatter films undermine the viewer's ability to predict, usually because a villain never dies (or the film ends with an unresolved plot), or because of adept manipulation of viewer expectations based (ironically) on pastiche and outright appropriation of scenes from other texts (Dika 110).[15] It would seem that the tension sacrosanct with a game that cannot be won is celebrated, as Dika puts it, as "active group experience"—it is a social celebration, ergo, a cultural one. But these games also occur independent of groups, on an individual level as not only Fraser suggests above, but Ihab Hassan as well. Hassan, in his aptly titled book, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, discusses the games readers play with any disruptive narrative. "A disturbed narrator," Hassan argues ("disturbed" being a criterion that can be met by any splatter film), "both absent and omniscient, leaves no alternatives to the reader but to become himself that narrator or close the book" (175).[16] Splatter films are a game in which viewers *become* the protagonist of *Evil Dead 2*, or the

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Bruce Campbell bids "a farewell to arms."

director of the film, or the helpless victim, and so on—they play roles while simultaneously being played upon. All films, it has been said, implicate viewers in their rhetorical space (Stam 153). But what separates splatter films from others are their postmodern underpinnings: the means by which the viewer acts in collusion with the film by playing narrative games. Viewers not only predict events in a splatter film, but also "fill in the blanks" between fragments of the text and, in essence, meld with celluloid, or become appropriated by it.

These psychological and sociological theories about "horror films as games" are nothing new, but when coupled with the notion of viewer as Baudrillard's "schizo," they can, by extension, be applied to postmodern culture at large. Noel Carroll—while charging postmodern critiques of horror as being "too rash"—grants that "Contemporary horror . . . articulates the anxieties attending the transition from the American Century to the 'we know not what' for mass audiences" (213). Our future is frightening because it is unknown, and splatter films exploit the fear and terror associated with the unnameable, by mirroring themselves and ourselves, our creations and our destructions. And since most splatter films "often delight in thwarting the audiences' expectations of closure" (Modleski 160), there may be a ray of sunshine glimmering in the puddles of blood. Where there is promise for a future—no matter how horrible its outlook may seem—there is simultaneously a sense of fear and hope as we approach it.

If, as a reading of Caramello's *Silverless Mirrors* suggests, "at the same time the postmodern yearns for the stability it has dismembered. . . it also joyously affirms its power to destroy because of the possibility it creates for regeneration" (qtd. by Olsen 10), then the game audiences play with splatter films are indicative of such an affirmation. Postmodernism is optimistic in the hands of the viewer who is willing to entertain possibilities for change. John Fraser agrees, and compares splatter films to fairy tales:

> In their collective inventiveness, their obvious fictions, their special effects, their variations on common themes, and their games with their audiences, they also celebrate, and make their audiences more conscious of, the shaping powers of art—an unalienated art. (53)

In these "games with their audiences"—pastiche and play—which are so strongly evident in splatter films, an optimistic organ exists beneath the postmodern skin, waiting to be excised. As Hegel suggests, "Man parodies the past when he is ready to dissociate himself from it" (qtd. by Stam 135). Splatter films incorporate a culture that recognizes that it must violently cut itself free from its own past by chainsaw, butcher's knife, or cleaver, while at the same time understanding the dangers involved with such a revolutionary act. These films are not merely a reanimation or dissection of contemporary culture. Splatter films are an audience-centered participation in the spiritual transcendence from Baudrillard's "dead body" of contemporary reality, which we can only understand through our own present-tense reactions to films like *Evil Dead 2*—or its recently released se-

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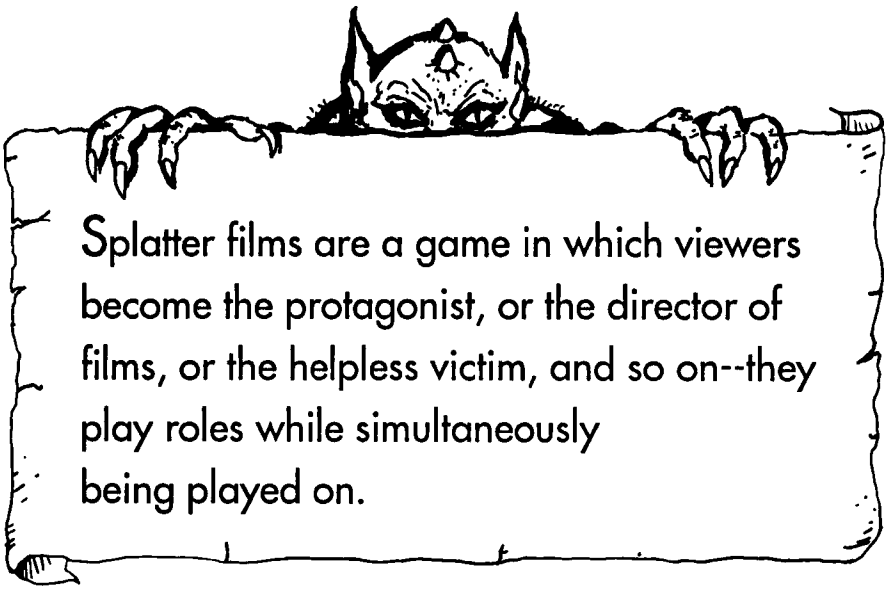
quel, *Evil Dead 3: Army of Darkness.*[17]

Horror literature has long been thought of as "survivalist" fiction or "cautionary" literature, but in a world numbed by mundane existence, culture fears change and settles for a slow, safe suicide, while the Uncanny slowly invades its climate, like the unexplained chemical accident that may have unexpectedly sparked life in the gray matter of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead.* Postmodern splatter films do not merely tell us, as Stephen King does, that "everything is turning to shit" —they show us that it has already turned. Or as "splatterpunk" critic Doug Winter has said, "It is a fiction that is saying 'Let's change all the rules,' and consequently, there is a more open-ended result . . . ultimately, it's our *lives* that make the horror" (qtd. by Nutman 85). If anything, postmodernism embodies the violence associated with our changing world and minds. Equally enlightening are the words of *Fangoria* film critic Chas. Balun:

> Perhaps the most notable contributions of such films as *I Spit on Your Grave, Maniac, I Hate Your Guts, or Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* is that they provoke an examination of conscience and force you to reveal your hand . . . and then they cut it off. (169)

The aesthetic of splatter is a realization that we have allowed the zombies of mass culture to take over, that our own fingers are reaching for the blade that could either set us free or unwillingly commit cultural suicide. The fragmentation and gore inherent in our films and culture reassure us merely with a fearsome grin, whispering, "Be ready for anything"—because the sawblade engine of change knows no bounds. "Who's laughing now?" the postmodern consciousness asks us— screams at us—



and the answer is simple. We all are—and we're cackling as we clench the pullcord of postmodernism between our teeth and ferociously yank.

NOTES

1. It should be understood that most "horror" films rely on fear as their central focus. What separates a "splatter" film from a typical horror film is that the impetus for fear is usually fear of physical destruction of the body, as opposed to other fears: of the unknown, of stock supernatural entities, of the dark, et cetera. In addition, "splatter" films and "slasher" fillms are not identical. "Splatter" refers to a film's preoccupation with effects, emphasizing its unique *visual* approach to the genre. "Slasher" is a term predominantly used to identify the film's villain as a psychological deviant, as distinguished from a supernatural agent (which the majority of horror films used before 1968). None of these terms is mutually exclusive.

2. "Postmodernism" is a term frequently abused by critics. For the purpose of this article, I operationally define "postmodernism" as a contemporary consciousness and aesthetic mindset as reflected in the cultural theories of Derrida, Jameson, and Baudrillard.

3. "Fragmentation" is an important postmodern element in that it forces the viewer to break down resistance to change, relinquishing the desire for a "total system" of narrative events in order to embrace a plethora of possibilities.

4. Ironically, *Halloween* uses a song titled "Mr. Sandman" in its soundtrack. Moreover, eyes play an important role in the film: Behind Michael Myers' mask, only the eyes can be seen. Splatter films tend to be preoccupied with the fragility of eyeballs, and *Evil Dead 2* is no exception. In one scene, an eyeball bursts from the head of its owner, sails across the room (in closeup, naturally), and lands squarely in the mouth of a screaming woman.

5. Camera speed is quite a destabilizing element in *Evil Dead 2.* Throughout the film, the camera interestingly shifts point of view, sometimes siding with the voyeur/viewer, at other times situating with the spirits that roam free in Ash's universe. It seems as though the camera—and thus, the director—has been "possessed" by the spirits of the film. The director is no longer in control, and "anything goes." The true monster is postmodernism.

6. By "simulation," I mean the same as Baudrillard, who claims that "all contemporary life has been dismantled and reproduced in scrupulous facsimile . . . producing 'a panicstricken production of the real and the referential' " (Connor 56).

7. I agree with Steven Connor's extension of Diderot's notion of "theatricality": "the name for the contamination of any artefact that is dependent upon conditions outside, or other than, its own" (134).

8. I mean "out-gross" in terms of both gore and profit.

9. "Simulcra" is defined as empty signifiers that do not reflect reality or anything besides their own artifice.

10. Derrida writes of "play" predominantly in terms of a text that undermines its own claim to have a finite meaning (or center), which gives license to the reader (or, in this case, viewer) to semantic freeplay, supplementing the text with his/her own meanings and experiences.

11. Jameson defines "pastiche" as a "blank parody" that imitates earlier texts and experiences "without laughter, without the still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic" (114).

12. Ash, the hero of *Evil Dead 2*, con-

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stantly situates himself with the audience, at once emoting both the directoral presence within the text and conveying how the audience should respond. For example, as a drawn-out, exaggerated scene in which Ash equips himself with weaponry à la Rambo, he faces the camera and says, "Groovy." Later, after a torrential attack by the "evil dead," Ash screams, "You bastards! Why are you torturing me like this? Why?!" Ironically, this is the same question that the viewer should be asking, because the "why" is never quite answered. What makes all this doubly interesting is the fact that director Sam Raimi and actor Bruce Campbell came up with this dialogue (and other off-beat "one-liners" that pepper the film) off-the-cuff during the film's production (Baronas 5). Such ad-libbing is indicative of Derridian play.

13. Derrida borrows this term from Levi-Strauss and modifies it to mean the borrowing of concepts from the detritus of a ruined heritage of texts.

14. Although Dika is referring explicitly to slasher films, I believe that there is a correlation between the narrative game she describes and the quantity of "simulated" violence in a film. For example, the most vocal audience I've ever witnessed was of the film *Misery* (not a splatter film). The teenagers in the audience screamed and commented throughout the film, especially egging along James Caan's character during the film's climactic battle, shouting at him to "Smash the bitch's brains out!" with a typewriter. Similar "active group experience" occurs during splatter films, although most of these are now played in the privacy of homes, among closed audiences, on the VCR.

15. *Evil Dead 2* appropriates an innumerable number of scenes from previous horror films. In one instance, a monster speaks to a woman by assuming the voice and visage of her mother, a device used by the possessed child in *The Exorcist*.

16. Ironically, the plot of *Evil Dead 2* revolves around a "book of the dead" that is missing pages the characters must find and reassemble. The opening scene of the film begins with the pictorial representation of a book being opened . . . and it is never shut.

17. *Army of Darkness* is an interesting film in that it places Ash in a medieval setting to conquer the same evil foes in his attempt to reconstruct the book of the dead. More slapstick comedy than splatter film, this reversion to primitive medievalism could provide clues as to what comes "after" postmodernism. To my mind, most postmodern texts are rife with allusions to primitivism, and this topic could present interesting directions for future study.

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